Liberty Utilities Resilience Corridors
Proposed Action

LOCATION AND BACKGROUND

The proposed project area is in El Dorado, Placer, and Washoe Counties on approximately (~) 6,300 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands managed by the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU) and the Tahoe National Forest (Tahoe NF). The project comprises roughly 55 miles of Liberty Utilities (Liberty) power lines, with ~54 miles on the LTBMU and one mile on the Tahoe NF (please see project map).

The USDA Forest Service (FS) and Liberty have long partnered to manage hazard tree threats along power lines in the basin. This project will build on that partnership towards our long-term shared commitment of reducing threats to critical infrastructure and increasing landscape resilience. It will also help give additional guidance to Liberty for future active hazard maintenance. There is a present need to reduce the risk of wildland fires that ignite from vegetation contacting utility infrastructure or failures in infrastructure. Recent destructive fires within California have demonstrated the need to also improve forest health and resilience by reducing fuels and stand density within the forests surrounding the power line corridors.

PROPOSED ACTION

The project consists of vegetation treatments in forest corridors adjacent to Liberty's power lines. These treatments would occur in untreated areas and would also connect previously treated areas. Treatment options include, but are not limited to: thinning; removing hazard and disease or insect infected trees; and, prescribed burning. These treatments will follow LTBMU Forest Plan guidelines and resource-specific design features. The proposed action will include implementation of best management practices (BMPs) and resource protection measures (RPMs) compliant with the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board Timber Waiver and the environmental thresholds stated in the Memorandum of Understanding with the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Work will also comply with California Public Utilities Commission and California Public Resource Code regulations.

The project would generally complete these treatments up to ~1,000' adjacent to power lines; treatments slightly further than 1000' may occur based on topography and previous fuel treatment areas. There are three treatments zones around the power lines (**Figure 1**). Zone 1 (up to 15' each side of power line): vegetation with potential to grow into utility infrastructure will be removed, along with defected trees. NFS land affected in Zone 1 is ~200 acres. Zone 2 (up to 175' each side of power line): trees with structural defects will be removed; fuels will be reduced to improve forest resilience to fire, insect, disease, and drought; and, thinning to desired conditions will improve forest health and resilience. NFS land affected in Zone 2 is ~2,100 acres. Zone 3 (up to 1000' each side of power line): reducing fuel loads and thinning the forest to desired conditions will improve forest health and resilience to disturbance. NFS land affected in Zone 3 is ~4,000 acres.

Treatments may include, but are not limited to: mechanical thinning, with biomass removal and/or mastication of fuels; hand thinning; removing excess fuels and competing conifers to enhance riparian vegetation in stream environment zones, aspen, and meadows; piling and/or cable yarding of forest biomass; chipping; and, prescribed fire (pile burning and/or prescribed under-burning). Under-burning could be used as a primary or a follow-up treatment option in all areas, depending on existing fuel conditions and post-treatment conditions, respectively. Operations would occur primarily from June 1st to October 31st; winter operations may occur, if approved by LTBMU recreation staff, when using identified groomed snowmobile routes.

Treatments may occur in the inventoried roadless areas of Hawley Grade (~100 acres), Fallen Leaf Lake (~400 acres), and Angora Ridge (~40 acres). Temporary roads would be constructed and restored after implementation, following FS best practices. Implementation could begin as early as late summer, 2019.

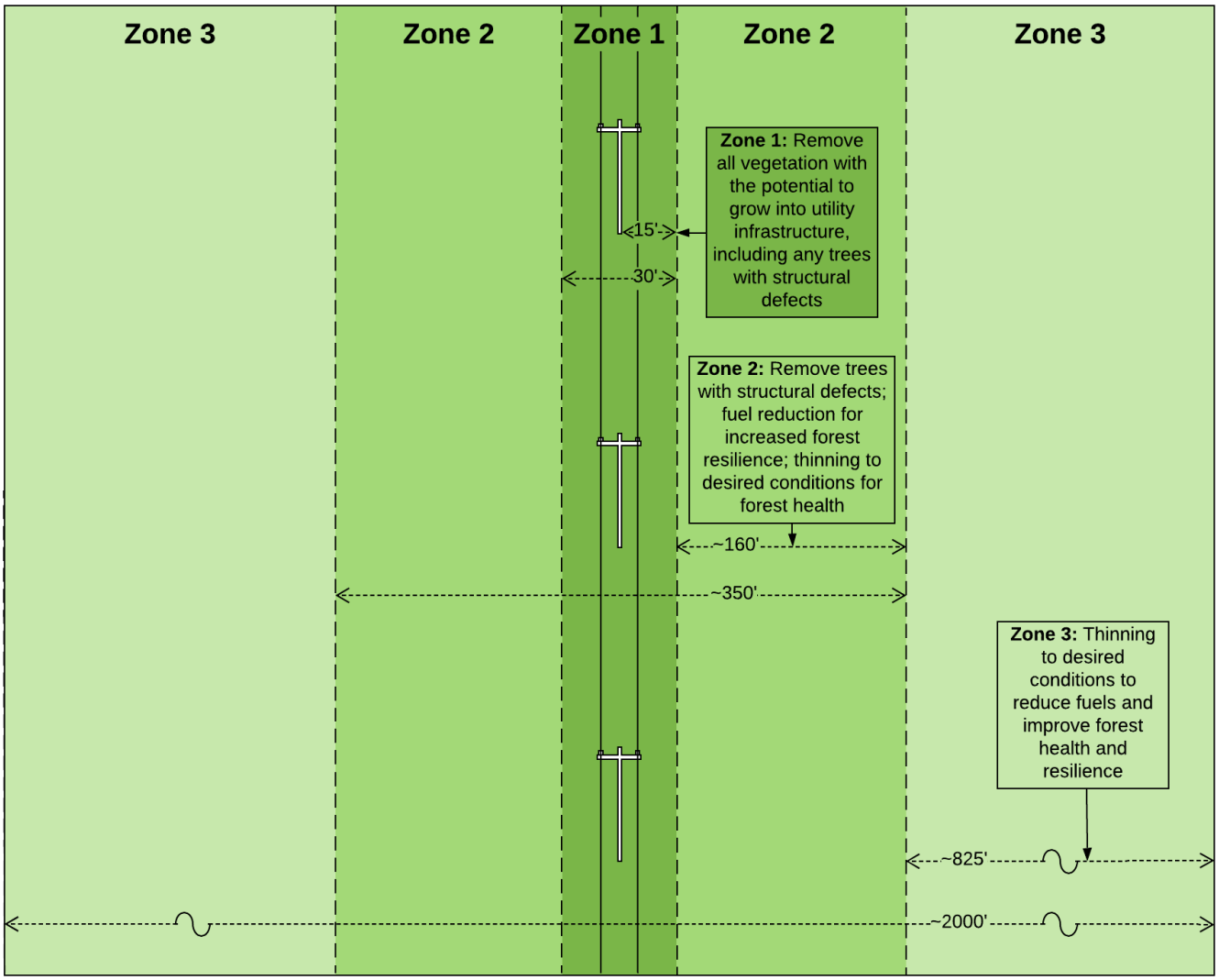

Figure 1. Treatments up to ~1,000' on both sides of power line in three Zones.

California spotted owl and Northern goshawk Protected Activity Centers (PACs) overlapping power line corridors would be carefully managed to prevent potentially catastrophic fire in these sensitive areas. Because PACs are increasingly destroyed by high severity fires throughout the Sierra Nevada, treatments in PACs will mimic low to moderate natural disturbances to facilitate tree growth, a benefit to these PACs. Where power line corridors overlap PACs, Zone 1 would be treated similarly to areas outside PACs to protect power lines. Treatments in Zones 2 and 3 would emphasize optimal forest structure for owls and goshawks.

PROPOSED CATEGORY

PUBLIC LAW 114–322: *Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act, Section 3603: A forest management activity conducted in the LTBMU for the purpose of reducing forest fuels is categorically excluded from the requirements of NEPA, if the forest management activity: notwithstanding section 423 of the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2009, does not exceed 10,000 acres, including not more than 3,000 acres of mechanical thinning; is developed in coordination with impacted parties, specifically including representatives of local governments, such as county supervisors or county commissioners, and in consultation with other interested parties; and, is consistent with the LTBMU land and resource management plan.*